

Social Organization and Interaction in *The Canterbury Tales*

Prepared by Cathryn Hennes
ENG 495

February 19, 2008

Social Organization and Interaction in *The Canterbury Tales*

When someone is expected to read *The Canterbury Tales*, there are many issues with the way the work was written based on when the work was written and how the social landscape was portrayed within the book. Written in the late 1300's, Geoffrey Chaucer should have been aware of the social climate of the time. Social organization was very important. Certain classes of people never interacted with other classes. Typically, members of the upper class would not interact with members of lower classes, meaning that someone considered a serf would not have social interactions with members of the upper class or royalty.

Chaucer knew all of this as he had been employed in the royal court. "Geoffrey Chaucer led a busy official life, as an esquire of the royal court, as the comptroller of the customs for the port of London, as a participant in important diplomatic missions, and in a variety of other official duties" (Harvard, *The Life of Chaucer*). He would have known who interacted with whom during the writing of this book. In the General Prologue, Chaucer directs us how to read the stories told by his characters and directs us as readers how to read the stories. Even though the stories are fictional, because the characters are fictional, he doesn't categorize the character's stories based on social classes. He also understood at that time, England's present, there were many of the working classes trying to change their social statuses. He explains and apologizes within the General Prologue that he is unable to arrange the individual stories based on this issue.

To start with, there is a listing of the characters who will undertake this pilgrimage, starting with the Knight. The prologue gives short descriptions of a few of the characters, all

being male, starting with the Knight, Squyer, and Yeman. Then, Chaucer turns his descriptions to the Prioress and Nonne. Then, he gives longer descriptions of more males undertaking this journey of which 16 more gentlemen are revealed and described before reaching the last female, the Wyf of Bathe. The announcement seems very strange in that first, there are only a few females on this journey, being male-dominated. Secondly, her description in the General Prologue is flanked by male descriptions; however, even though there are few females in the story, during this time in history, society was primarily male-dominated.

The end of the General Prologue is where Chaucer apologizes for the story and how it was written. Even though the story, along with the individual narratives from the characters are all fictional, he apologizes for what has been written, that he has only put down what he has heard. The complete story is his written work; he does not want the reader to make him take responsibility for what has been written. This makes the story very ironic, being fictional to begin with.

“But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n’arete it nat my vileinye,
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this matere,
To tell yow hir words and hir chere,
Ne thogh I speke hir words properly.
For this ye knowen al so wel as I:
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he can
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large;
Or ells he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thing, or fine words newe.
He may not spare, although he were his brother;
He moot as wel seye o word as another” (Kolve 20).

Chaucer asks his readers for good will when reading the work and for our understanding about what has been written. He is the author of the work; the work is fictional, however, he wishes to be distanced from what he has said in the writing.

The characters appear to be very unruly. The last character described in the General Prologue is that of the Host. He is not a pilgrim, but the owner of the establishment the pilgrims stay at while on their journey. The Host is to be the judge and jury of the pilgrims' tales. He tries to keep order amongst the pilgrims, being a difficult task as there are so many different people within his building. In charge of the process, he would be one who should handle which character recites their tale in a specific order. Due to the sheer number of characters, he is just unable to keep any control over the pilgrims.

The language used during the writing of this work also made it difficult for Chaucer to correctly write the work. "Chaucer was of the gentle classes and he clearly spoke French from an early age and probably first wrote poems in French, the language of the courts in which he served first as a page in the court of the Countess of Ulster and then as squire in the courts of Prince Lionel and Kings Edward III and Richard II" (Harvard, *The English Language in the Fourteenth Century*). During this time, individuals spoke, using their local dialects. Chaucer's speaking and writing was the closest to modern English that is used today, and his dialect was based on where he lived, being in the south east section of London. However, not all individuals would have understood his writing. People from lower classes would not have been educated enough to be able to read or write, let alone read anything in French, which was his main language. At the time of his writing, English was replacing French as the main language for everyone. The royal court used both languages interchangeably. For the social status that the

royal class wanted to keep, wanting to be separate from the lower classes, French was continues to be used.

“And French she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford ate Bowe,
For French of Paris was to hire unknowe” (Kolve 6).

Once the reader starts reading the individual tales, the use of language doesn't appear to be as important.

Each one of these characters has issues with their social class. Along with the issues within the order of each of the stories, Chaucer's descriptions of individual characters go against the social organization of the time. When reading the General Prologue, the Wyf of Bath is described as fun, “In felawschipe wel coude she laughe and carpe” (Kolve 14).

She is described as being well-dressed and wearing clothes that normally would not be found on a woman with her social status. Most likely, she wore the color red in the story. This color was not to be worn by someone of her status. She enjoyed a certain position in church based on her being married five times and receiving the property and wealth of her deceased husbands. Based on her husbands' financial statuses, she had the wealth and property of a nobleman, but did not have the title. This is called the “sumptuary laws.” “They were quite specific, and the penalties for violating them were sometimes harsh and could include fines, the loss of property, title, and even life” (Forsyth).

Forsyth gives a guide as to what colors and fabrics specific women could wear based on their social status:

“**None shall wear** . . . cloth of gold or silver, or silk of purple color. . . except . .
.Countesses and all above that rank. (Viscountesses may wear it in their kirtles.)
None shall wear . . . silk or cloth mixed with or embroidered with silk, pearls, gold or

silver. . . except . . . Baronesses and all above that rank. **None shall wear** . . . cloth of silver in belts or kirtles. . . except . . . Wives of Knights and all above that rank. **None shall wear** . . . embroideries of gold, silver or silk (mixed) or headdresses trimmed with pearls. . . except . . . Wives of Baron's Eldest Sons, all above that rank, Baron's Daughters, Wives of King's Knights or Privy Councillors, or Maids of Honor. **None shall wear** . . . velvet in upper garments or embroidery with silk thread. . . except . . . Knight's Wives and all above that rank. **None shall wear** . . . velvet in kirtles or petticoats, or satin in gowns, cloaks and other outer garments. . . except . . . Wives of Knight's Eldest Sons, Gentlewomen attending Countesses, and all above that rank. **None shall wear** . . . satin, damask, taffeta or grosgrain in their gowns. . . except . . . Landed Gentlemen's Wives and all above that rank” (Forsyth)

It seemed for the Wyf of Bathe, none of these laws applied to her as she was not any of these titles.

In fact, she didn't seem to be a “lady” at all. In the scheme of the layout of the General Prologue and narratives, she is in the middle of men. Being that she has been married five times, she seems very comfortable around males. She has many of the characteristics of a male as well, being candid and straightforward, along with being very antagonistic. She appears to be long-winded like some males as her own general prologue is as long as her narrative tale. Because she is antagonistic, she dares the Host to try to stop her from explaining her tale in the general prologue. In this case, being one of a few females, she actually gets to tell two tales, her own prologue, seeming to be autobiographical and her tale.

She is very candid and straightforward. During this time in history, these traits were never described in a woman. She likes to talk about sex and procreation. She has been married five times to prove this fact. She uses scripture to prove her points. In the Bible, relationships were based on men having multiple wives where: 1. The wife died and he remarried, or 2. The husband had multiple wives all at once. Her prologue talks of the “if a man can do it so can I”

mentality she had. In the end, the Wyf of Bathe does not seem to be a woman of her times. If anything, her actions are those of a woman in the modern world of the 21st Century.

There are so many other social issues that are portrayed within this book. The community doesn't appear to be true to characters of that time. However, with that being said, the pilgrims are fictional. In any fictional setting, the characters can be portrayed in any format that the author chooses. Within this book, the author decides to not follow the standards of social interaction and organization, but also apologizes for such a change in the normal way status and social organization is handled.

Works Cited

Forsyth, Amy. The Sumptuary Laws of Tudor England. 6 March 2001. 19 February 2008
<<http://www.renaissanceactor.com/sumptuary.html>>.

Harvard University English. The English Language in the Fourteenth Century. 1 May
2001. 19 February 2008 <<http://courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/language.htm>>.

Harvard University English. The Life of Chaucer. 21 September 2004. 19 February 2008
<http://courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/varia/life_of_Ch/ch-life.html/>.

Kolve, V.A. A Norton Critical Edition Geoffrey Chaucer The Canterbury Tales Fifteen Tales
and the General Prologue. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005.